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Leenhouts, Jack and Thelma Oral History Interview: Tulip Time

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The Hope College Oral History Project for 1995
The Joint Archives of Holland

Interview #15
Mr. and Mrs. Jack Leenhouts [Jack & Thelma]
The Oral History of Tulip Time

Conducted by:
Jason Valere Upchurch
7, July 1995

The Oral History of Tulip Time
Interview #15

- Interview w/ Jack and Thelma Leenhouts @ their home
- 204 West 12th / Holland, MI 49423
- July 7, 1995
- Interviewer: Jason Valere Upchurch

Begin Tape 11 : Side A

TL: My name is Thelma Leenhouts, and I was born in Holland, Michigan. In fact, I was born in the house on Twelve West Twelfth Street, where I grew up, and I was born on [date removed], 1917.

JL: Yeah, my name is Jack Leenhouts, and I was born in Holland, Michigan. Didn't live here very long, but at least I was born here on [date removed], 1916. Thelma forgot to mention that her maiden name was Kooiker. [Cousin of Ken Kooiker from previous interview.]

JVU: Over the years, how have the two of you been involved with Tulip Time? How have you been associated with the Tulip Time festival?

TL: Well, when I was in school, junior high and high school, I took part in . . . in fact I was in Dutch dance, and then when I taught school, I marched in the parades with the kids. I sang in a trio, and so we sang at the Lit club at noon, when they had lunches there, and we also sang at the armory when they had a program there.

JVU: And Mr. Leenhouts . . .

JL: Well, not having gone to High School, or grade school in Holland, my earliest association with Holland, with the Tulip Time, was when I was at Hope College, and after that. While I was at Hope College, or just immediately upon graduation from Hope College, I did participate in one of the spectacular presentations that they had here at Tulip Time, and you can read all about that in the newspaper clipping if you'd like to. It was kind of a gala

operation. I assume that there were anywhere from five to six hundred people that participated in that, ranging in ages from the grade schools, right on up. The big episode as I remember it in that pageant was when one of the people who was taking the part of a Dutch merchant in the Netherlands, rode on stage with his horse and carriage. I think it was about six horses and a carriage, and he gave all of those for one tulip bulb. It seemed to impress me at the time, but that was the time of tulip fever that took over the Netherlands, when tulips were a very important commodity in their trading.

Subsequent to that, I took part in Tulip Time as a member of the city government. Myself, along with one of the other members of city government, were the two people that really helped start Windmill Island. It was started about 1964. We helped prepare the island financially, not physically because there were laborers who did that, but we set up the accounting system for it, we set up the receiving system, we set up the attendance system, and we were fortunate enough to be there when it was opened by Prince Bernhardt in about 1964.

TL: You also marched in a few parades.

JL: Oh, I marched in a few parades as a city official, but not as a youth or a child.

JVU: Could you describe for me any changes that you've seen in the festival, during the years that you were involved, and even beyond?

TL: Well, the parades have become larger. The route has changed, and I would say it's become more commercial.

JL: How about the early emphasis on the Dutch girl? I can recall, when your sister was in it, wasn't there an emphasis on the Dutch cleanser aspect of it?

TL: Well, that's where they got the idea for the costumes, from the Dutch Cleanser. In fact, I have a picture of myself in one of those outfits. Well, and in the early days too, they'd have girls meet the train that would stop in Holland.

JL: One of the things I can remember--I don't know how far back this goes--Holland Furnace Company, which was an important part of

Holland community, helped promote Tulip Time by having notables in here; p screen and sports world notables.

TL: Dorothy Lamour.

JL: Dorothy Lamour, and of course the big thing that I remember was when they had Rocky Marciano come in here. He did some of his training here during the Tulip Time. It was to excite the tulip festival as well as to help him too I suppose.

TL: Well, it just has become larger and larger. With all the bands and all of the areas now, including Zeeland and Hamilton, and West Ottawa, is part of it, and it used to be just Holland. Now, the girls--and fellows too--do the Dutch dance. The Children's Parade is all the kids, from first grade through fifth grade now it is--used to be sixth grade--all participate in the parade.

JL: As Thelma said, a lot of young men in High School dance the Dutch dance, but way back when it originated--and I don't know whether this is true or not--but they had half the dancers were girls dressed as girls, and the other half of the dancers were boys, but they were really girls dressed as boys because the Dutch did not believe in dancing; at least they did not believe in boys and girls dancing. So, the boys were really girls dressed as boys.

JVU: Do you think the changes you've seen in the Tulip Time festival over the years have been good? Have [they] been positive or negative for the festival?

JL: I always think that it's kind of strange when they have Dutch dancing on the street, and you see Cambodians, Latinos, Koreans dressed in Dutch costumes and doing the Dutch dance. Now maybe that's the times, maybe our visitors think that's wonderful and fine, but I think it's a departure from the Dutch tradition, the Dutch heritage; when everybody in the parade and in the schools, had a Dutch name, and even the names have been destroyed somewhat.

TL: Well, that's all been changed.

JL: No, I was thinking of our own name. Our name is L-E-E-N-H-O-U-T-S, and the Dutch pronunciation of the double "e" was an "A", so our name, a while back, used to be "Lane-hoots," like "Du-Praise," D-U-P-R-E-E, and "Spate," S-P-E-E-T. Now today, that's Speet, and

Dupree, and Leenhouts, so even our names have been somewhat distorted as a result of that.

TL: Whether that change is good or bad, I don't know. I suppose we have to go with change.

JVU: How do you think the trend towards ethnic diversity in Holland has effected the festival?

JL: As I said earlier, I don't think it's added to it. It's added diversity, but I don't think it's added any authenticity to it. In a sense, the diversity has added competition, which I'm not so sure is a good thing. We've had the tulip festival. We've had it for fifty years or more, and now the Latinos have to have a Latino festival of their own, at the same time, in competition. So, in that respect, it hasn't been good I don't think.

JVU: Do you think that Dutch pride in Holland is what brought about the tulip festival, or do you think the tulip festival has caused a rise in Dutch pride?

TL: Well, I think the latter, that the tulip festival has caused a pride in the Dutch heritage really. People, apart from the city of Holland, didn't know about us before, but as a result of the tulip festival, people all over the country know about Holland, Michigan. Whenever we go anyplace, and we say we're from Holland, Michigan, they say, "Oh, where they have Tulip Time." So then we take pride in the fact that we've put on a good, clean, wholesome family festival, and they like it, and they say, "Oh, I remember that," and they remember it with enjoyment I guess. So then we take pride in that I suppose.

I think that that's the kind of pride we have. We don't have any real ethnic pride, and if we do, it's kind of tongue and cheek. That is, we'll tell Dutch jokes. You know, like you tell Polish jokes; we'll tell Dutch jokes, and we'll make fun of ourselves. I don't think that there's any true--what would you say--"pride pride." You know, people say to you, "Are you a Dutchman," and you say, "Yaah!" We laugh at the same time.
[laughs]

JVU: What do you feel it is about Holland, Michigan that has

allowed the Tulip Time festival to grow to the size that it's grown to? To have such a national appeal?

TL: Well, I feel so many people want to get into the act really. And people are cooperative.

JL: I agree with Thelma. I think that when we started out, we had our own little community Tulip Time, but as newcomers moved into Holland, they kind of saw the potential of the festival and they said, "Hey, this could be really big," and I think a lot of the industrialists who have come into town with their families and their wives, have helped promote Tulip Time way beyond what it would have been if we hadn't had them come in. I think it helped in that respect.

JVU: Alright, so you think it's a sense of community then . . .

JL: Yes, community more than Dutch. It's community, good solid community.

JVU: Anything else you want to say about that?

JL: I think a lot of people who are, quote, "Non-Dutch," have become much more involved in Tulip Time than the Dutch have, and they take great pride in it because I think the word community is the key really, not Dutch.

TL: We've even had the President here, President Bush was here during Tulip Time. (Visited during his early campaign against Reagan)

JVU: Speaking of people coming to the town, my next set of questions is about the tourists who come here, and I know they're a topic of debate among Holland residents. How do you feel personally about the tourists that come into town during the Tulip Time festival?

TL: It's always been alright with us.

JL: I think it's great when they come here.

TL: Some people say, "Oh Tulip Time," and they leave town, but it's fun, it's exciting, and if we didn't have the tourists, why . . . what would Tulip Time be?

JL: I think that a lot of people have made a lot of lifelong friends out of tourists who have come here and stayed at their

tourist homes for those few days, or that week, and come back again next year, and the next year. I think there are people coming back to the same tourist home or tourist house almost since the inception of Tulip Time. I think the town has grown as a result of Tulip Time by people who have come here.

TL: We've talked to people, "How come you moved to Holland?"

"Well, we visited during Tulip Time, and we liked it," so then when they retired, they come to the town.

JL: Hope College has grown as a result of Tulip Time. The same reason people have come in and said, "Oh, a college. What a nice setting for a college," and they investigate, then they end up their son or daughter eventually ends up going to Hope College as a result of Tulip Time.

JVU: What are some of the other sentiments that tourists have expressed over the years?

TL: We haven't had any direct contact with tourists. One time we let some people stay here, and never again.

JL: We opened our home up, and it wasn't the nicest experience. It wasn't bad, but we just didn't enjoy it that much. We have a small home, so maybe that was why. What was the question again, Jason?

JVU: Some of the other sentiments that tourists have expressed?

TL: Oh, I was going to say that a lot of people have written to the Sentinel and expressed appreciation for the wonderful treatment they've had in Holland.

JL: I think the Sentinel would have been fair to publish both types of letters. Their letters are always complimentary aren't they?

TL: They have been. We don't know whether they've gotten other kinds.

JL: Well I think they would publish them dear. The Sentinel likes controversy.

JVU: Do you think the tourists that come here have an authentic Dutch cultural experience, or do you think it depends on where they visit while they're here?

TL: I think it depends on where they visit.

JVU: What would you say over the years has helped the festival

become more authentic?

JL: I really don't think that it's become more authentic, in one respect: in an attempt to promote Tulip Time, they brought in what they call class act numbers like the Lawrence Welk Show, The Smothers Brothers; they're not Dutch, you know that, but they figured that the people who are coming in want to see something like that. Those are the headline shows, when actually the best shows, are the shows that would give them a feeling of Dutch authenticity. [Those] would be Holland Heritage Show, a tour of the Cappon House, a tour of the Holland Museum . . .

TL: Then the Dutch Village

JL: The Dutch Village, Windmill Island, the lunches served at the Woman's Lit Club--saucizabroadges; pigs in the blanket and pea soup. Now you go downtown, and you get a hamburger. You go there (Lit Club) and you get something authentic. It's there if you want to look for it, if you really want it, but if they don't want that--if they want the glitz and the glamour--they've got that too.

JVU: Do you think the tourists that come here overall, have a positive experience? Not only dealing with the festival, but also with the Holland community?

TL: I would say so. We haven't really heard anything negative.

JL: I don't think the community gouges the tourists. The restaurants all seem to keep their prices about the same. Some people say . . . they raise their prices at Tulip Time. If they do, it's just a little bit. We have those commercial wagons downtown now--what do you call those, where they sell the hot dogs and the candy corn, and the . . .

JVU: Carnival wagons.

JL: Carnival wagons and the elephant ears, and all the other trappings that go along with any sort of carnival or convention. I don't really think that adds to the . . .

TL: No, that doesn't promote the Dutch heritage of the . . .

JL: It just helps feed people that maybe the restaurants wouldn't physically be able to do. As far as gouging is concerned . . .

TL: I think they [the carnival wagons] do.

JL: If there's any gouging, it's done at wagons like that, because they have to hit and run. They have to take their money and get out.

[Brief discussion of Carnival Wagon prices.
Not related to Tulip Time.]

JL: As far as the community is concerned, I think it's kind of their fault. It's here to be had.

TL: Like I said, we've never talked to anyone who said [they] were sorry they came.

JL: We've got the heritage shows, we've got the flower show, we've got Windmill Island, and those are priced very low. That's where your authenticity, your ethnic aspect is.

JVU: Do you have any specific memories of past Tulip Time festivals that stand out as particularly memorable or special for one reason or another?

JL: Did you know Lida Rogers in school?

TL: Yeah, I knew who she was.

JL: Were you in school when she was a teacher?

TL: Yes. Well, I didn't really know her personally, I knew who she was, yes.

JL: She was supposedly the founder . . .

TL: The one who suggested [Tulip Time].

JVU: Did you have her as a teacher?

TL: No, no.

JVU: Did you ever hear, maybe around school, any of the stories that she would share of her ideas for Tulip Time?

TL: No, I didn't.

JL: You must not have traveled in the same circles with Lida Rogers.

JL: Were you a girl or a boy [dancer] during Tulip Time?

TL: The first couple Tulip Times, I was a boy.

JVU: Then you were involved with the Dutch dance?

TL: Yes.

JVU: Do you have any stories about that?

TL: No, I don't have any.

JL: The music is completely different now than it was then.

TL: The piece that we danced to--"Oh where, oh where has my little dog gone." We sang a Dutch song.

[Mrs. Leenhouts sings a Dutch song.]

JL: They sang Dutch songs, which they probably wouldn't do today.

JVU: Do you know when the music changed for the Dutch dance?

TL: No.

JL: I can remember that for years and years, from the inception of the Dutch dance music, until the year he died, Nels Bosman took care of the music that was broadcast around, amplified around Centennial Park for the Dutch dancers. Nelson Bosman was one of the founders of the radio station, WHTC. He ended up being the mayor of Holland, and all that time, he personally helped put up that audio system, the loudspeaker system for the Dutch dancers. Even when he was mayor he was doing that; putting that up. I thought that was quite remarkable. He had a span of fifty years in there when he did that. He did it the year he died; he just died last year. I suppose it's little things like that, that Jason's interested in.

Of course, people have told you about Willard Wichers I suppose.

JVU: Oh, Mrs. Wichers told me about Mr. Wichers. Are there any stories that you have, personal stories, did you ever deal with him personally? You said you were involved with Windmill Island.

JL: See, I used to work at City Hall, I was the city treasurer, personnel office for at least twenty years at the City Hall building, and all that time, Willard Wichers had an office in there as the representative of the Netherlands government here in the city of Holland. I was never sure what his title was, but it would come in "Dutch Information Service." Anything that came in of that nature was routed to Willard Wichers, and he was a very . . . he

was up on the third floor, which I didn't think was very fair because he was getting older and older and still had to climb to the third floor, but I never knew anybody who could accomplish as much with correspondence as he did. That was of course the days before long distance telephone company calling, faxing, V-Mail and E-Mail, and all the rest of the things. He wrote letters all over the world, and maybe Mrs. Wichers told you that he must have turned over a ton of letters to the museum. Of course it was through his efforts, and you know that too from what she said, that the Windmill was brought here. He was a great guy, had an office on third floor of City Hall for the twenty years that I know of.

JVU: You said you were the city treasurer at that time? How did the Windmill effect that aspect of the city, the economic side of city politics?

JL: Well, Windmill Island was a . . . because of the controversy of Windmill Island--it being open on Sunday--they couldn't get the support of the community behind Windmill Island, because back then things were still closed on Sunday; nothing was open. The thing that sparked the opening of entertainment things on Sunday was the Holland Bowling Alley. They brought a lawsuit against the city of Holland. They wanted to be open on Sunday, the City Council said, "No you can't," and they sued and won. They could be open on Sunday, and so that was really the first chink in the armor of openings on Sunday.

Because of that, Windmill Island was not tax supported, it was supported by a bond issue. Bonds are sold to anybody who wants to buy it. With that money, Windmill Island was started and then it was supported by revenues, not tax money. So, the only impact that it had on city government, was that it made more work for some people. There was a department set up, the Windmill Island department, which was headed up by . . . we had two kind of people to start with. We had a director of Windmill Island who was kind of the Madison Avenue man, who would promote the island, and then we had a gardener who would see that the floral displays were in order and in bloom at the time of Tulip Time, and that the

windmill operated properly and that sort of thing. Then, for the last twenty-five years, I feel they made a slight mistake in that they had a combination director and gardener; one position. They should have had two, and we'll see what the recommendation of the new Windmill Island is, but I still think they should have somebody in charge of the island and promote the island, go all around the country promoting it.

TL: When they first had the windmill, they had a lot more people that would attend. A lot more visitors than today. The last couple of years, the attendance has really gone down. I don't know exactly why.

JL: Not this year, '95, but '94, they had their worst year in history. I feel it's a lack of promotion. It's probably not akin to anything you're asking, but the island is a great feature really, and that windmill they have down there . . . is a great attraction. They could do a lot more with it, if it was promoted properly.

Mr. Bouws--you know, Russ Bouws from Russ' Restaurant--very instrumental in supporting that island, because he thought it was a good attraction, and there was significant donations made by him to the Russ Bouws pool, and to the Vresian Barn that they want to construct some day on Windmill Island, and that would be largely as a result of donations made by the Bouws family; Russ' Restaurant family.

JVU: Are there any other people that you associate with the Tulip Time festival?

JL: Well, I like to think of Jerry Fairbanks, the first director of Windmill Island. As I say, he was the man who helped promote the island. It was a Madison Avenue type promotion, and we brought him from resort in Michigan, Hidden Valley. Hidden Valley was I think the resort where we brought him [from], and we brought our gardener, Jaap deBlecourt from Mackinac Island, as the gardener, and I think when they had the two positions, it was a lot more successful, and then when they combined it and put Mr. deBlecourt, the gardener, in charge of promotion and gardening. So, Jerry

Fairbanks' name stands out as one. Can you think of any local people that. You've probably received names from other people.

TL: You've probably already talked to Margaret Van Vyven. Eugene Heeter was the band director at that time. I'm sure that he was instrumental in having the bands come.

JL: In fact, it was Mr. Heeter that started this band shows that they have, and this festival of bands that they have at Windmill Island, where they get the prizes. You see the winners walking in the Tulip Time parade carrying their plaques or their wooden shoe, which was first, second, or honorable mention. That was started by him. There's some other names in there who were very active in promoting that. Find some names in there--and maybe some other people have mentioned them--you see their connection. I'm thinking of Mrs. Snow, who was behind the scenes, musically, of just about everything. In fact, it says in that article, that she played for that on cold nights, and they'd have a special heater down there that would . . .

TL: She was an organist.

JVU: Any other people that you can . . .

JL: A lot of people have passed through our lives; how instrumental they were in different cases. I can remember the city managers that we had, and of course you've got that too. First one I worked with was Herb Holt, and I think that the Windmill was brought in during his administration as city manager. He was followed by Bill Bopf and Bill Lamb, Nels Bosman.

TL: I can't really think of any body else.

JL: It's kind of hard to think of names.

JVU: What do you think through the history of Tulip Time, has been the most important event that has caused the festival to go in the direction that it's gone?

JL: I personally think it's the Dutch dancers. I think that's the heart, soul, and core of Tulip Time. It's real authenticity, it's real, something really ethnic in their appearance. You can tell by the costumes.

TL: I was going to say, the costumes have to be authentic. They

have to be approved. Another thing I would say, is the Children's Parade. I think that's great, and the third would be the Parade of the Bands on Saturday.

JL: That Children's Parade; I think you're right. The Children's Parade that takes place on--it opens on a Wednesday and the Children's Parade is on Thursday, and if it rains then it's on Friday because there's no parade scheduled on Friday--that Children's Parade goes on as long as any other parade. We have children from every elementary school around here in that parade. I think it was Ripley's Believe it or Not that said if Chinese men marched four abreast past a certain point, they would march on forever. Meaning, they would just reproduce, and keep reproducing and keep going, they would never stop. I always had that feeling when I watched the Children's Parade. So many children, all dressed in Dutch costume, and all promoting a specific aspect of the Netherlands's culture, like the fishing or the cheese, or the flowers. I think you're right though, that's one of the really ethnic parts of the Tulip Time.

[Brief discussion of family.

Not directly related to Tulip Time.]

JVU: Do you see anything wrong with the Tulip Time festival, the way it is now, or the way it has become?

TL: Well, I think when they changed it to two weeks, we were a little bit disappointed.

JVU: In what way?

JL: The commercial aspect. It's a commercial lengthening of Tulip Time.

TL: I don't know if that has hurt Tulip Time or not, but of course we see busses going past here, way early, even before that first week.

JL: On the other hand, we think one of the greatest contributions made to Tulip Time was made by bus tour companies that bring in these busses, because the roads would be clogged if everyone of

these people were to bring a car. They bring in hundreds of busses. They don't do much, they drive up and down the lanes, they deal with the restaurants, but I think they see an excellent impression of Tulip Time. They're all taken care of. They don't have the crush and the push of downtown. If they see the parade, they have reserved seats.

TL: And then they have guides that ride on the busses and explain things.

JL: I think the busses, and those tours, are a great thing.

JVU: I was wondering if you saw, personally, any problems the festival might have.

JL: We're not terribly in favor of lengthening it. We think that's done for commercial aspects. You might say . . . you need these glitzy shows I suppose, like the Smothers Brothers and Lawrence Welk, for the more shallow people who like that sort of thing; the polka dance type thing. If they want it, why fine, it doesn't make any difference with us one way or the other. We don't think it adds to Tulip Time.

JVU: Do you feel the festival faces any challenges for the future?

TL: I don't really think so.

JL: I think it's a very well-established festival, very well-established. Well organized, it's got a good reputation, a good name, and what is it, the second or third largest floral festival in the country? It just has to keep going at the same high level it had up till the last years.

TL: You worry about the tulips, but they've always turned out right. By having an early variety, so that they lasted.

JL: I don't think that this is a real challenge to Tulip Time: Pella, Iowa has a floral show, a tulip show, but people still come to Holland, Michigan. I think the name is very important.

JVU: What has Tulip Time meant to you year after year?

TL: It's been fun and been exciting, and we try to see the Dutch dance. Of course when our children or grandchildren were in the parades, we go and see the parades. We don't care to leave town.

JL: Personally, we approach Tulip Time enthusiastically. We look

forward to it, and we doubly enjoy it when our children were dancing, and now we're enjoying it again because our grandchildren are in there, and I think it's that way with most of the old time citizens of Holland; they enjoy it. We enjoy it.

JVU: What is your favorite part of Tulip Time?

TL: Dutch dancers.

JL: Dutch dancers, I think that's the heart and soul of Tulip Time. If you didn't have Dutch dancing, you wouldn't have Tulip Time. It's almost as simple as that. You can have all the windmills you want, but you've got to have this: people.

-End of Interview-